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ABSTRACT

One way to develop creative solutions to problems facing rural education today is through cooperative projects sponsored by schools and colleges and funded by small incentive grants. In 1983, the Council of Chief State School Officers, with grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, awarded 39 planning grants for $2,000 to enhance/facilitate working relationships between elementary/secondary and postsecondary education. Again in 1986, a major Mellon grant enabled funding of collaborative projects focusing on improving the current teaching force or attracting exceptional persons into teaching. Exemplary original Mellon projects were the Gadsden (Florida) project to train school personnel to prepare/counsel rural black students for postsecondary education and the Montana project to include rural/remote teachers as members of accreditation teams. Current Mellon projects compared rural, suburban, and urban staff development programs in Colorado, developed quality teacher inservice training modules and recruitment/retainment measures in Idaho; designed staff development programs impacting student learning in Minnesota; and built transitions for secondary students to postsecondary education in North Dakota. While federal funding may be unavailable, modest amounts of incentive monies can be obtained from local businesses and banks, state department of education discretionary funds, colleges, universities, community colleges, and private foundations. (NEC)

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THE BRIDGE TO ARCADIA:

SCHOOL/COLLEGE COLLABORATION AND THE RURAL TEACHER

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THE BRIDGE TO ARCADIA:

SCHOOL/COLLEGE COLLABORATION AND THE RURAL TEACHER

I feel genuinely privileged to be here today. Although I have lived the past twenty years of my life in populous urban areas, I was born and raised in a rural area of the midwest and think of myself as an indelible product of rural education.

So often, when some people think of rural education, the image that comes to mind is that of the bucolic, serene, one-room schoolhouse set off in the countryside with a caring, nurturing, dedicated teacher administering to the needs of the students. I am as guilty as most when it comes to indulging in fantasy about country life: like the ancient Greek poets, I am tempted to conjure up an Arcadia of peace when I think of the word "rural."

Somehow you would think that I'd know better, having attended a rural school, but I have to admit that the older I get, the more I look back upon those days with greater longing. Actually, I am not even particularly bothered by the hard fact that "making do with less" was a way of life for us. We were severely underequipped in every way. Often, we had to use pieces of broken chalk (I remember picking them up off of the floor to give to the teachers). During the long, cold winter months we often weren't sure if there would be enough coal to stoke the furnace

(somehow, there always were). Our chemistry lab was filled with broken beakers, but we used them and we learned chemistry just as well as with unbroken beakers. We did have a marching band. I played the trombone and held it together with a piece of string. I had friends who went to large, suburban consolidated schools and when they described those schools or when I had the opportunity to visit such schools, they seemed comparable to colleges to me. I was often stunned by the resources such schools had access to.

In my school, we were always dealing with what we didn't have. Yet, for all of those hardships and the "making do with less," I came out of that system with a fine education. That fact has less to do with me, and everything to do with the fine, dedicated teachers who taught me and cared about me.

As most of you know, making do is a way of life for most school personnel in rural areas. I found particularly striking a testimonial which appeared in a recent publication entitled Alaska's Small Rural Schools (issued by the Institute for Social and Economic Research). This profile depicts a day in the life of a principal/teacher in a 16-student rural high school in Alaska, and it goes like this:

> I'm usually up at 6:00 AM. I get over to the school, and my wife stays at home to get the kids up and going. We have no washing facilities at the House. I usually get myself cleaned up over at the high school, so I'm on the job at 7:00. I'm usually doing administrative work from 7:00 to 8:00 and class preparation from 8:00 to 9:00. Classes start at 9:00. Then it's a real go period until 3:30. I'm either in the class teaching or off handling a maintenance problem

or dealing with an administrative problem. From 3:30 to 5:00 I'm either helping kids with homework or with a form they have to fill out or just sitting down to chat with them because there's not enough time during the day to get personal. We might talk about a problem, because I'm also the counselor.

I usually stop at 5:00 so I can pick up the children, go home, and have dinner. But if I'm behind, then I'm back over at the school at 8:00 pm. My wife writes me notes to communicate. It's been a real strain on the marriage.

And then there are the emergencies...[If] the generator is down...I get up out of bed, I go back to school, I shut down the generator, and I try to bring another generator on line. If it's a severe problem, then I have to trudge through the storms or whatever to get my maintenance man. We're out there until 2 or 3 in the morning putting a generator together. Then I go back to bed and get up at 6 again.

As most of you know, this scenario is not too uncommon in the day-to-day life of rural school personnel. My question is, with all of the major national reports being issued on teacher education reform, where does a school like this one in Alaska fit into that national reform movement? And what measures are the Council taking through the Mellon project to bring rural schools into the mainstream of reform by helping rural teachers?

First, by way of background, let me tell you briefly about the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Mellon Project in general. The Council is a nonprofit education association located in Washington, D.C. comprised of the top public official responsible for education in each state. State superintendents and commissioners of education in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the six extra-state jurisdictions

are the sole members of the Council. Like many other nonprofit education associations, we provide a variety of services and technical assistance to our members. One such service is the Mellon Project.

In July 1983, the Council received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to enhance and facilitate working relationships between elementary/secondary and postsecondary education. In September of that year, we awarded thirty-nine $2,000 planning grants to as many applicant states; and in January 1984 we called together a blue ribbon selection committee to award implementation grants (on a competitive basis) to 14 states (out of 47 applicants).

These grants in the first project ranged from $25K to $30K, and were for 18 months duration. In January 1986 the Council received a second major grant from the Mellon Foundation to select another group of states, but this time the collaboration was to focus on one of two areas: 1) improving the current teaching force or 2) attracting exceptional persons into the profession. Again, we called together a blue ribbon selection coommittee which, again, selected 14 projects at grants of about $28,580 each. There is a strong representation in the prairie states among those fourteen and an almost even division of urban programs and rural programs. A bit later in this talk, I will address some of the specifics of the rural projects.

But before I do that, I would like to put rural education as a whole in a national perspective by looking at some hard data.

Once having done that, we will look at the Mellon model as a way of getting at some of the pressing issues facing rural schools and their teachers.

- First of all, rural schools schools comprise the majority of the nation's schools (67%); of the 15,600 U.S. school districts, 8,000 have 1,000 or fewer students and 12,000 have 2,500 or fewer students. Yet, the majority of the school population resides in urban centers, a prime factor in the allocation of federal funds.

- There are still approximately 835 one-room schools in the U.S. In the state of Montana alone, there area 114 one-room schoolhouses. This is probably no surprise to you, but it is to many, especially those on the eastern seaboard who think the one-room schoolhouse no longer exists at all.

- Rural schools have as much as a 40% attrition rate of staff per year.

- Two-thirds of the banks in the U.S. that have closed in recent months have been in rural areas.

- Traditionally stable farm economies are declining; farms that have been in families for generations are put on the auction block daily.

- The young are fleeing from the heartland. According to Bud Hodgkinson (ACE) the prairies states now have an increasingly older population,

not because people are retiring to those regions, but because the young are leaving (or, as he put it, "moving to Malibu as soon as they get their driver's license").

- Rural populations are declining: according to the Hudson Institute, from 1930 to 1980, the proportion of the U.S. population living in rural areas declined from about 43% to 26%; the farm population alone declined from 30.5 million in 1930 to 7.2 million in 1980. Since 1980, that population has declined even further.

- Despite the good news about the General Motors Saturn plant in rural Tennessee and the Citibank financial services center in Sioux City, industry is fleeing from rural areas and concentrating itself in urban/suburban areas. Rural economies, on the whole, have never recovered from the recession of the late 1970s and early 80s. (Hudson Institute).

- Incomes in rural areas are notoriously low and job opportunities relatively few. Rural unemployment rates remain high and in fact outdistance urban unemployment rates (Hudson Institute).

- In oil-dependent rural economies, state revenues can be reduced by as much as $1 million every time the price of oil drops $1 per barrel.

- According to a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, multibillion dollar losses are expected in the drought-plagued southern rural states with the largest farm economies, a fact that is already affecting education funding in those states.

- Federal programs to stimulate economic growth and development in rural areas have been drastically reduced.

- And, last but not least, we are expecting national teacher shortages of more than one million by 1990.

That is not, to say the least, a propitious backdrop against which to attract and retain rural teachers.

Now, I know that you brought me here all the way to Washington State to bring you good tidings and buck up your spirits. But these issues concern me. And pitted up against this backdrop of rather dire circumstances, major reform in rural education becomes ostensibly untenable. Coupled with that is the sheer dearth of accurate data regarding rural economies, rural education, and rural demographics in general. This fact alone has placed policy makers, both state and federal, in a state of "unpreparedness" to deal effectively and appropriately with rural issues; and this is due not only to the fact that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has drastically cut back its

research in rural education, but also because the data we have now is rendered obsolete because of the dramatic changes that have occurred in rural economics in the past five to six years. To gather the most accurate data in order to formulate effective policy would constitute going back to the primary source, an undertaking and expense to which few agencies are willing to commit themselves (Hudson Institute).

So, as Tolstoy said, "What shall we do?"

For starters, I would advise "thinking small." Drastic problems cannot be effectively solved by tossing large amounts of dollars at them helter skelter. The problems facing rural education today are simply much too complicated for that. These problems must be analyzed (with accurate data to back up any analysis), isolated, and broken down into their components. And rural issues have regional differences that must be taken into consideration--the delivery systems for education in Alaska are not the same as in rural Ohio.

I firmly believe that one way to begin developing creative solutions is through the cooperation of schools and colleges. One of the best ways of building such cooperation is through small incentive grants. I regard myself as a veteran of a decade of reform and I have been involved in reform projects that have given grants as small as $800 to local projects with some pretty phenomenal results. And for those who might say that $30K is not very much to motivate school/college collaboration (as in the Mellon Project), I beg to disagree. Let me share a case study with you from the first Mellon project.

What I would like to talk with you about this morning is the Gadsden

Demonstration Models Project, a collaborative enterprise in Florida under the first Mellon project. I bring this to your attention to demonstrate how a modest amount of money can serve as a catalyst for reform in an economically depressed rural area.

The Gadsden Demonstration Models Project was already underway when Florida received its 30K Mellon grant in 1984. However, the effort needed impetus, and that grant provided that push.

This project was a cooperative effort of the Gadsden County school system, the state department of public instruction, Florida A & M University, Florida State University, and Tallahassee Community College. The project was coordinated by the Florida Institute of Education and had the full support of the Chancellor of the University of Florida System.

The two main goals of the project were to train school personnel in more effective ways to prepare and counsel rural black students, and to work collaboratively with three postsecondary institutions in developing these counseling techniques in order to bring these kids into the postsecondary system. Another goal was to improve the recruitment of minority students and to facilitate the college admission process through training of selected college and high school personnel. To help achieve these goals, the grant provided funding for a series of two-day workshops conducted at each of the four Gadsden County high schools. The workshops involved teams of 20 individuals and resulted in a collaborative three-year action plan for each school for the training of select personnel to prepare black students for college admissions.

Even with all of that cooperation, the project had many strikes against it. Gadsden County had not been able to attract business and industry the way nearby Tallahassee had and the more successful Tallahassee became, the more Gadsden County suffered from a declining tax base and a "brain drain" from their school system. Also, the average annual per capita income in the county in 1984 was $4,971. Postsecondary education among young rural blacks was rare and the schools were losing their best teachers. But the county had something else, a sense of heritage. Much of the black population of Gadsden County can trace its roots back to the original freed slaves who settled there after the Civil War. The population felt a deep responsibility to their community, and it is really this spirit that made the project as successful as it was.

By the time I went down to the town of Quincy to make a project site visit, community action groups had formed around a series of project issues such as: how to bring back good teachers, how to attract business and industry, and how to attract whites back into the community. The groups were biracial and diverse in the kinds of people who participated--parents, teachers, college faculty, lawyers, doctors, business people--you name it. The small amount of money afforded by the Mellon grant gave the project a rallying point, and it really took off! Let me read you some data from their final report.

- In Shanks High School, a virtually all-black high school, a goal of 65 college enrollees for 1984-85 was set as part of the project's goals.

That goal was reached, and a 66th student enrolled in a technical school. Although these numbers may seem low, they were unprecedented for Shanks.

- Scholastic performance improved dramatically:

  91% of the tenth graders in Shanks passed the communications section of the required state Student Assessment Test;

  93% passed the mathematics skills test.

These scores were higher than the state's respective averages of 88% and 84% and were the highest ever in Gadsden County.

- One module of the project promoted strong encouragement for black students to take the ACT or SAT, with fee waivers provided if necessary. In former years, fewer than ten students would take those tests, but in 1985, fifty-five took the ACT and five took the SAT. All received higher than average scores and qualified for university admission.

Although these numbers would appear low by any large, urban school district standard, they are significant for a rural area like Quincy. It is precisely because rural areas perceive themselves as so isolated (and sometimes forgotten) that reform becomes paralyzed. But small amounts of money (even $2K grants can work this way) can really help break through

this isolation, formalize partnerships between schools and colleges, build morale, and help move the issues forward. In fact, the Gadsden teams all stated that one of the most significant impacts of the Mellon grant was the tremendous boost it offered to the morale of the particpants. The Florida project has been funded a second time under the curent Mellon project to carry their model into an urban area--Miami.

I would also talk at length today about another rural project in Montana, but those folks are here at this conference and will be presenting a case study of their own, so I won't preempt them. However, I would like to make a few general comments about why that project has worked so well. Many of you know what the logistics are like in a state like Montana. I had the good fortune to spend a summer in Montana during my college years, and was stunned by the distances. People 35 miles away are referred to as "neighbors." The Montana Educational Challenge Project, funded under the Mellon grant, was faced with the need to bring teachers in remote areas into training sessions to become members of joint accreditation teams. Among other things, the grant provided the necessary travel monies for project team members to get to those distant locations, such as some of the isolated Indian reservations. One week the Montana project coordinator called me (apologizing for not returning my call sooner) to tell me that she had logged 1,500 miles on her car that week for project trips and planned to log an additional 800 miles during the weekend.

As I mentioned earlier, the purpose of the project was to build joint

accreditation teams which would visit the schools. These teams consisted of personnel from the Office of Public Instruction, from local school districts, colleges, community colleges, and the University, and even four state legislators. Many school personnel who are hundreds of miles away from colleagues were afforded the rare opportunity to work together with peers during the team training sessions. A total of 351 persons were trained for team participation. Out of this project, a talent bank of those team participants has been developed which is accessible to all local schools, no matter how remote, to provide, among other services, inservice training for school staff. You will hear more about Montana's project later this week from Bob Anderson and Dwayne Jackson.

I view the Florida and Montana projects as successful undertakings in rural education reform because both effectively broke through the isolation of teachers, bringing them into the mainstream of what each state can offer to improve their working conditions and to enhance their professional development. Furthermore, both projects brought the conditions of rural teachers to the attention of their respective higher education systems and to the state policy makers. Previous to both of these projects, the assumptions which both higher education and the state policy people were making in those states about the needs of rural educators were simply, in many respects, not always accurate. Now, they know better.

In the current Mellon project, out of 14 state-based projects, several

focus solely or in part on rural education issues. This tells me that the states are trying to tell us something: "Sit up and listen to your rural schools. We need help. Yes, we can provide the solutions, but we just cannot do it alone. And don't make trite and simplistic generalizations about rural education. Sure, we have problems. You don't think that there are at-risk kids in rural schools? Hunger, poverty, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and even teenage suicide. Sure there is." These problems are not the sole domain of urban areas. Yet, urban centers primarily get the attention. That has got to change.

We need to be fully prepared to aid and assist that principal/teacher in the 16-student rural Alaska high school. The various Mellon projects are applying a variety of means to get to those teachers on the Indian reservations and in areas so remote that they are accessible only by bush plane or dog sled. Parenthetically, I might add that I favor the use of technology in reaching teachers in rural areas, but I also feel strongly that we must get "real live bodies" out to those people in remote areas who have little if any interaction with colleagues. Breaking through the extreme isolation that many rural school teachers experience and providing them with high quality inservice training programs is one of the most positive ways we can retain them.

The Mellon projects have done much of that, and are now developing additional ways of reaching rural teachers. Very briefly, I would like to point out what some of the current Mellon projects are up to:

Colorado has developed a comparative project among rural, suburban and urban schools utilizing the current research on effective teaching and staff development to test out the most effective ways of devising high quality staff development programs. With this mix of schools, the project will be able to draw comparisons between the needs of rural and non-rural schools. (In cooperation with the University of Northern Colorado).

Idaho has developed a statewide project which will have important consequences for that state's rural teachers. The project will develop high quality inservice training modules for teachers and will drastically reform teacher recruitment measures. This project will also work in tandem with the state's regional inservice consortia in an attempt to retrain former teachers not currently in the workforce to fill critical areas of shortage. (Also in cooperation with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the University of Idaho.)

Minnesota has devised a project to design staff development programs which will impact directly on the learning of students by utilizing the research on effective schools and provide inservice training for both school teachers and administrators. Again, this statewide project will reach the rural areas and bring those teachers into the mainstream of the activities.

North Dakota will focus on building transitions for secondary students

to postsecondary education in part by improving the quality of teachers in secondary education and raising their awareness of the needs of those students making this transition. This will impact the rural areas, especially those Native Americans not ordinarily involved in such activities.

I realize that these programs may sound a little ambitious, but we have found through the first set of state projects that a little bit of money can go very far and have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of teachers. What's more, private funds are relatively unrestricted, encouraging more flexibility, allowing mid-course adjustments, and have far less red tape to grapple with. Personally, I have found that I can do a great deal more with a relatively small grant that has little or no red tape than I can with a large grant that has me enslaved with paper work and unrelenting accountability. And I have had both.

Based upon those dire facts that I laid out to you a little while ago, I think we can safely say that rural education is at a time when it needs a greal deal of care and feeding. The states are already telling us that in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways. Out of the 33 proposals we received for the second Mellon grant award competiion, more than half addressed a rural education component of some kind. In 1983, out of the 47 proposals which were received for the first competition, about four-fifths addressed some issue of needed teacher education reform. That was about two years before teacher education became the high profile, national issue it is

today. Are the states telling us something? Will rural education become one of our next high profile reform issues? I hope so.

Teacher shortages are already hitting some rural areas. The the first order of business must be to attract and retain quality teachers in rural schools--like the dedicated ones that I had, and that many of you sitting here today had. Without quality teachers in rural schools there will simply be no rural schools. However, I am not always convinced that even the best-intended state or federal policy makers always have a complete grasp on the kinds of unique problems that face rural schools, and when they do get involved, they sometimes do the wrong thing. But this may not be as much their fault (if, indeed, we are finding fault) than that of those who articulate the issues and problems to them.

One thing I have learned from lobbying in Washington: never take the problem per se to the policy makers: always take the solution to them. How to get to the solution? Well, first let's talk about funding.

I see in the position statements of this consortium that there are frequent references to the need for increased federal funding. Amen to that.

But I would certainly caution you against throwing all of your eggs into the federal funding basket. For one thing, the monies are not there--especially the kinds of funds you need to signicantly advance rural

education. We at the Council are constantly reminding ourselves of the cutbacks in federal funds. We have a poster hanging in our office (maybe some of you have seen it) which reads:

> "It will a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the air force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber."

I would urge you to think somewhat differently about funding--think small in the beginning, and back off from the "big bucks" mentality. With some small amounts of incentive monies, solutions can be cooperatively and collaboratively developed, tested, adjusted, and <u>then</u> expanded. At that point, you've got something to show your state legislature and even the feds: you have begun to unravel the problem, you <u>can</u> come up with the answers. You've field-tested your case. Maybe, just maybe, the state legislature will include all or part of your effort in next year's appropriations. That is not so far fetched. Seven out of fourteen of the first set of Mellon projects got all or part of their efforts picked up by their legislature. Why? Because they had something to sell that had been produced with relatively small amounts of monies.

I am a great believer in the mini-grant approach to funding. If I were a foundation officer, I would be inclined never to award a large grant to a fundee until I had awarded a small incentive grant to that party. When people can creatively work with small amounts of monies, it tells you something. I have seen the mini-grant approach work time and time again. For example, out of the 39 projects in the first Mellon

project which received $2,000 planning grants, 27 were able to secure additional funding to continue their programs in some capacity. One rural project in the southwest went to a local bank to secure continued funding.

There are other examples. Recently, I caught up with a former colleague of mine who had received, some years ago, a small grant from one of the national projects in which we were both involved. The $800 grant was the cause of some derision among our other project participants, one of whom said that "$800 wouldn't even buy you lunch."

As it turned out, my colleague not only bought lunch, but some wine as well, and invited the members of the university's curriculum committee (many of whom barely had been on speaking terms for months) to a retreat. More was accomplished during that one retreat than during the entire academic year. When I recently saw him, he asked, "Remember that small grant you gave me six years ago? Well, as a result of the project which we started with that grant I got a follow-on grant under title III." "How much?" "About one million dollars over three years." He continued, "You know, mini-grants are a little like the parable of the talents: give me 10 talents, and I'll increase it to 100."

Another recipient of one of those $800 grants said at the time, "Oh, well; $800 is better than nothing." Much better, as it turned out. He was able to secure a large implementation grant from DOE as a result of the work accomplished on virtual pennies. Mini-grants do work on the

atomic principle, and that is why I believe this approach to funding needed reform in rural education is just about ideal and quite necessary to your survival.

Modest amounts of monies can be obtained from a variety of sources: local businesses, local banks, state department of education discretionary funds (if you don't go after them, somebody else will); you can promote cost sharing with colleges and universities and community colleges to begin a joint focused project, such as developing inservice training in your region. Involve a state legislator and get his or her attention (your efforts may eventually be included in an appropriation). Build coalitions of support around issues and give all relevant parties ownership in the effort. And always, always involve teachers in the planning process of anything that touches them.

The current fourteen Mellon projects had to provide clear proof to us that teachers were actively involved in the planning of the state projects and that they were to play a significant role throughout the program. The days of "doing a number on teachers" are coming to an end. More and more, teachers will decide their fate and their future. The recent Carnegie report certainly made that clear.

And always involve key people in your collaborative efforts. Do not assume that your local college president fully understands the pressing issues facing your schools. The Montana project has been a testament to

this by involving higher education faculty and administrators. Most of them came out of that experience saying, "I had no idea."

Last, but not least, cultivate private foundations, both large and small, local and national. Despite what you think, they are not inflexible about their funding priorities, and they are not even beginning to scratch the surface in rural education funding. Somebody is not getting to them--you are not getting to them. I will tell you that the next national education priority is going to be the whole issue of at-risk kids. But educators, policy makers, and funders alike associate this issue almost exclusively with urban centers. You will have to shout to be heard: "Look, there are at-risk kids in rural areas and they are hurting." But the urban centers have outdistanced you in foundation funding, because those people are on top of the foundation world all the time and the problems of the cities are on the front pages of every major newspaper and news magazine, not to mention the electronic media, daily. You will need to get into the foundation offices to tell your story because over the next few years, you will be competing with the urban centers even more than you are now.

Last month, I heard Ernie Boyer [President, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching] give a speech at the National Press Club about at-risk kids. He spoke exclusively about urban school populations. And yet, he spoke in detail about his values coming

from a rural education background. I have heard him give this speech often. He always speaks of his grandfather, who walked six miles to school, his own teachers whom he remembers as transmitting a strong value system to their students as well as being able to communicate subject matter. But when Ernie speaks of the burning problems in education today, he speaks of urban, not rural, schools. One year from now, I want to walk into the National Press Club and hear Ernie Boyer give a speech about the problems in rural schools and what we can do to preserve and advance rural education. That isn't going to happen unless the Ernie Boyers, John Goodlads, and Ted Sizers of the education world are cultivated by people knowledgeable and articulate about the needs of rural education.

The past and current presidents of the U.S. are products of rural education--Plains, Georgia and Dixon, Illinois. These men have spoken nostalgically about their rural upbringings and the values associated with their early lives, but they need to know that that way of life is threatened, and lip service is no longer enough. The key policy makers need to be involved and they need to come out into the open to see the problems for themselves. The next time Secretary Bennett visits a classroom, you should make certain that it is a rural classroom.

And, finally, you need to get to the public. Not just the rural public, but the public as a whole. I want to see a cover story in Time Magazine on rural education within the next year because that's what it will take to make an impression on the general public. Rural education

needs to hit that level of the media. Otherwise, the public will continue to focus its attention on urban and suburban schools, or, more likely, other more trivial issues.

In my estimation, rural education holds great possibilities in the future. It is deeply ingrained in our American culture and has survived many tests of time. But people can no longer feel sentimental about it without becoming involved. Personally, I am grateful for my experience in a rural school, and the older I get, the more I realize that I was given a kind of accidental gift. Recently, I took my three stepchildren back to my hometown in Ohio for a Fourth of July celebration, and Fourth of July in my hometown is right out of Norman Rockwell. After some twenty years, there were still teachers of mine in the community, still teaching in the school, all of whom remembered me. Now, you have to understand that my kids go to a large, consolidated suburban school with a transient population that is larger than the university I went to, and they were literally dumbstruck that so much continuity, so many linkages to my past had been preserved in the town where I grew up. They never had that, and to this day they can describe that Fourth of July in rural Ohio in excruciating detail, but can tell you nothing about the Bicentennial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. which they attended.

That experience told me that I had taken something for granted about my past, a mistake that I don't intend to perpetuate. I want to see kids in rural areas have the same opportunities to flourish just as I did. Our charge--yours and mine--is to guarantee that nobody takes rural education for granted ever again.

Thank you.